

Career Path

Elite coach brings new strategies to the table

By Charles Mak



Chan Kong Wah, table tennis coach, elite coaching division, Hong Kong Sports Institute Limited
Photo: Edve Leung

In Hong Kong, youngsters with the potential to make it big in the sporting arena usually put those ambitions aside and concentrate instead on completing their education or starting a "real" career. Even following the Athens Olympic Games where Li Ching and Ko Lai Chak distinguished themselves by winning a silver medal in table tennis for Hong Kong, most local people with the potential to emulate them will continue to regard the sport as a pastime rather than something to pursue full time.

Chan Kong Wah, table tennis coach in the elite coaching division of the Hong Kong Sports Institute Limited, reluctantly acknowledges that situation. Formerly an elite sportsman and now an outstanding coach, Mr Chan effectively began his career as a 10-year-old living in mainland China in the 1970s, which is when his talent was first spotted. "Table tennis is one of the mainland's most popular sports," he says. "After four years of fairly intensive training, I started to enter senior tournaments and dedicated myself to becoming a full-time player."

Around seven years later, Mr Chan moved to Hong Kong and was initially surprised to find that the sport enjoyed nothing like the same status. Nevertheless, he went on to represent the territory for four years, winning numerous medals and trophies along the way. This led to a period playing in Germany from 1986 onwards, where he believes his career peaked. He returned to Hong Kong at the age of 34 in 1995 for one final flourish and was still good enough to win six more medals. At that point, he felt the logical thing was to take up coaching.

Different personalities

Doing that for the last ten years has given him a deeper understanding of the game, as well as of many other aspects of elite sports. "As a coach you have to look after the needs of several athletes, while as a player you only concentrate on your own performance," he says. The main challenges lie in dealing with the different personalities, backgrounds and techniques of the members of the squad. "You must have the ability to devise training plans and strategies to suit individual athletes," he explains. "I need to maintain close relationships with all of them and help however necessary. This also means understanding their state of mind and ensuring they have the right psychological approach to training and tournaments."

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Unfortunately, many young players in Hong Kong never fulfil their undoubted potential. Mr Chan says that children under the age of 13 show greatest promise, but are usually forced to concentrate exclusively on academic work. "Parents don't encourage their children to become professional sports people because they feel the career is short and too uncertain," he adds. "In Germany, however, big corporations offer sponsorship to help athletes take part at the highest level and even provide employment opportunities when they retire from active competition."

Tough competition

Despite that difference, Mr Chan believes that the local sports will continue to develop and can produce more champions. "Our athletes have a high degree of self-confidence and, with support from the government and the business sector, we can expect improvements in the results achieved at major

competitions and international events," he says.

The ongoing target is for his charges to qualify for and perform well in selected tournaments in the lead-up to the next Olympic Games. Mr Chan closely monitors worldwide developments in table tennis and believes that the toughest competition will continue to come from players in China. One of the major challenges remains finding training partners for Hong Kong's top players. "We simply don't have enough people to help with the practical training process," he says. "As a result, we have to send our athletes overseas for intensive training."

When in Hong Kong, the daily routine involves two hours of coaching each morning and three in the afternoon, which leaves Mr Chan time to perform his other duties – administrative work, strategic planning, performance reviews and analysis, and meetings with the business sector and media. Named as Coach of the Year in April for his contribution to sport and the Olympic success, Mr Chan is already planning for further successes. "Expectations create stress, but can also lead to great satisfaction," he says. "Coaching in Hong Kong, though, is not just about helping athletes to win medals. It is also about getting more local people to participate actively in sports."

China Opportunities



At the moment, finding a position as a sports coach in China is next to impossible. The mainland has a very clear structure for developing sporting talent and there are many thousands of experienced coaches to oversee it.

In Mr Chan's opinion, Hong Kong sportsmen with language proficiency, communication skills and good personal connections might be able to land jobs as sports administrators, but the chances are still slim. "If they try this, they should also expect a much lower salary," he says. "Coaches born and trained in the mainland will stand a better chance of getting those jobs."

Career Path

In sports coaching, there is no career path to follow. Sports coaches are usually retired sportsmen who possess extensive experience in international tournaments. University graduates of physical education or related disciplines may stand a better chance of entering the coaching field but years of professional experience are usually required. Coaches for private institutions may be a possible choice for those looking to break into the field but these kinds of coaching are mainly on a part time basis with hourly wages ranging from \$40 to \$200.

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